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Is the "Literature of Possibility" Possible?
A translation of Oda Sakunosuke's "Kanōsei no bungaku" with commentary

Andrew Murakami-Smith

1. The "Literature of Possibility"

Oda Sakunosuke's "Kanōsei no bungaku" ("The Literature of Possibility"), an essay published in *Kaizō* in December, 1946, attacks the literary establishment and its fulsome praise of the mainstream "mental-attitude-style I-Novels" typified by the fiction of Shiga Naoya, and exhorts Japanese writers to go beyond the narrow strictures of the autobiographical I-Novel and use fiction (humorously called "lies" in the essay) to create a "literature of possibility." Donald Keene, in *Dawn to the West*, describes the essay as "unsystematic and even confused. It is easy to believe that it was written in one night. For all his intermittent brilliance, Oda never explains precisely what he meant by a 'literature of possibility.' Did he intend to say no more than that the novelist should be allowed the privilege of inventing?" (Keene (1984), 1087).

For Keene, writing from within the Western literary tradition that valorizes imagination and fiction, it is only natural for writers to "invent." For partisans and practitioners of the I-Novel like Kambayashi Atsuki (a writer whose works, along with Shiga's, Oda's essay singles out as examples of the boring I-Novel), writers who "invented" too freely seemed to lack sincerity, and might be seen as pandering to the masses: "Oda Sakunosuke was the one who first strongly cried out for fiction, but in his case, was it not the helpless struggling of one who has one foot in the popular novel, or, failing that, the rationalizations of one who is about to step into the popular novel?"[1] Keene is also tepid in evaluating Oda's career as a whole: Oda "ranks as no more than an interesting minor writer" (Keene (1984), ibid.).

Keene's *Dawn to the West* is full of pronouncements on the literary worth of individual writers, and judgments of the literary quality of specific works, but nowhere does he specify his criteria for evaluating literary quality or worth. However, many Japanese writers and literary critics contemporaneous with Oda tend to agree with Keene's assessment that "Kanōsei no bungaku" is, as literary theory, flawed, or at least underwhelming. The scholar of French literature Kuwabara Takeo, whose "Nihon gendai shōsetsu no jakuten" (1946) Oda quotes in "Kanōsei no bungaku" (Saitō (2020), 81), wrote that the essay's "main argument is perfectly correct, and in the West would be considered no more than common sense."[2] Oda's friend and fellow "Decadent" *(Buraiha)* writer Sakaguchi Angō, too, wrote that the essay was "not really a new argument. It is actually quite elementary, and exceedingly self-evident."[3]

Others considered the essay no more than a personal attack on Shiga Naoya. As Kambayashi wrote, "Just before his death, in 'Kanōsei no bungaku,' Oda Sakunosuke showed his opposition to Shiga Naoya."[4] The English literature scholar and critic Nakano Yoshio wrote that "just because Shiga called him 'dirty,' Oda blew his top,"[5] and that "In this essay, Oda took out his frustrations by ferociously attacking writers like Shiga Naoya, called the god of fiction, and Kobayashi Hideo."[6]

Or might we consider the essay the rebellion of an Osaka underdog against the power of the Tokyo literary establishment? After his death, Angō write that Oda was "an unhappy man" because "he was too aware of his hometown, Osaka" and that "though he possessed talent and to spare, it was confined to Osaka."[7] In fact, Osaka was a theme that Oda returned to again and again in both his essays and his fiction. He wrote on Ihara Saikaku, an Osaka fiction writer of the Edo period, in "Saikaku shinron" ("A New Theory of

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[1] 「虚構ということを強く叫びだしたのは織田作之助氏であったが、織田氏の場合、通俗小説に一歩踏み入れた人のあがきか、さもなくば、通俗小説に一歩踏み入れんとする人の理論づけではなかったのか。」(Quoted in Saitō (2020), 338)

[2] 「本筋はきわめて正しい立論で、西洋ならむしろ常識であろう」("Oda Sakunosuke no koto" (1948), quoted in Saitō (2020), 81). All English translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

[3] 「別に目新しい論議ではない。実はあまりにも初歩的な、当然きわまること」("Osaka no hangyaku" (1947), quoted in Saitō (2020), 81).

[4] 「織田作之助氏は、死の直前、「可能性の文学」において、志賀直哉氏の文学に反発を示していた」(Quoted in Saitō (2020), 87.)

[5] 「志賀に「きたならしい」と一言云われたばかりに完全に逆上してしまった」(Quoted in Saitō (2020), 87.)

[6] 「織田は、このエッセイのなかで、文学の神様といわれた志賀直哉や小林秀雄などを、八つ当たり的に斬りまくった」(Quoted in Saitō (2020), 87-88.)

[7] 「織田は悲しい男であった」「あまりにも、ふるさと、大阪を意識しすぎた」「ありあまる才能を持ちながら、大阪に限定されてしまった」("Mirai no tame ni" (1946), quoted in Saitō (2020), 334.)

Saikaku"), and of the Bunraku puppet theater that had its roots in Osaka in "Niryū Bunraku" ("Second-class Bunraku"). He depicted the struggles of Osakans to survive the carpet-bombings of the city by US bombers, and to rebuild in their aftermath, in "Tachiagaru Osaka" ("Osaka Rises") and "Eien no shinjin" ("Eternal Rookies"), both written in 1945. And he recounted his own evolution from ambivalent feelings toward his hometown and rejection of Osaka dialect to an affection for the city and a championing of its dialect in "Osaka, Osaka" (1941).

Some of the negative criticism of Oda's "Meoto zenzai," the work for which Oda first became well-known, seems to have been in terms of stereotypes of Osaka, as he caricatured in "Kanōsei no bungaku" as follows: "every newspaper and magazine vilified my works using such abominable language as 'low, facile, vulgar, the spirit of a craftsman and a merchant's soul, coarse, pornographic, typhus, poison, blasphemous against humanity, frivolous and flighty'..."[8] Though he may have embarked on his fiction career considering himself a "writer" plain and simple, such criticism of his works as, in part, "too Osaka," must have made him for the first time aware of being a "writer of Osaka." As Ōtani Kōichi wrote in his biography of Oda:

> Sakunosuke immediately shook off such negative criticism. He had gone so far as to think of writing works like those of writers who were praised by the literary establishment, but no more. The reason was, first, Sakunosuke's self-respect. But he found another support as well. At that time, there was something he became clearly conscious of for the first time. This was Osaka. It was clearly Tokyo that preferred ideals and held abstract concepts in the utmost esteem. This was the source of most of the vilification. The literary establishment where they conspired together was in Tokyo. He had been attracted by Tokyo, but now this suddenly changed. He would emphasize the fact that his literature was Osakan. … Kyoto and Osaka alone had the tradition to oppose Tokyo culture. … The entirety of Sakunosuke's literary theory began with this backlash against Tokyo.[9]

Is "Kanōsei no bungaku," in fact, nothing more than a confused literary theory, a mish-mash of unsurprising advocacy of fiction in literature, personal attacks on Shiga and his epigones, and the rantings of an Osaka underdog against Tokyo hegemony? Did Oda actually try to realize a "literature of possibility" in his own fiction? The essay was one of the last things that Oda wrote, so it is impossible to know how he might have applied his own theory in future. However, among the stories written during Oda's very productive year of 1946 (when "Kanōsei no bungaku" was published) are many which do, in fact, bear a resemblance to the autobiographically-tinged I-Novel that he criticized in the essay, such as "Sesō" (tr. Burton Watson, "The State of the Times"), although Oda's stories lacked Shiga's deadly-serious tone, instead presenting their protagonists in a frank, tongue-in-cheek manner. On the other hand, Oda's final work, *Doyō fujin (A Saturday Wife),* left unfinished at the time of his death in January, 1947, was a departure for Oda, in that it was completely fictional, was set in Tokyo, and featured a multifarious cast of characters intertwined in a complicated web of relationships. Was *Doyō fujin* Oda's attempt to broaden the possibilities of literature?

Oda's friend (and one of the editors of his posthumous collected works) Aoyama Kōji thought so: "*Doyō fujin* was ... an experiment in applying Oda's theory of the so-called 'literature of possibility' to the writing of a work, and, to borrow the words of the novel itself, 'the author's attempt to bring to light social conditions by pursuing the possibilities of happenstance.'"[10] The writer Fuji Masaharu agreed: "Making use of happenstance and his talent for telling lies, Oda Sakunosuke tried to pursue what he called 'the possibilities of human beings.' The most splendid and most perfect crystallization and outpouring of this was *Doyō*

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[8] 「私の作品がどの新聞、雑誌を見ても、「げす、悪達者、下品、職人根性、町人魂、俗悪、エロ、発疹チブス、害毒、人間冒瀆、軽佻浮薄」などという忌まわしい言葉で罵倒されて…」(Oda (1946/1999), 253).

[9] 「作之助はそんな悪評をたちまち振り切る。文壇でほめられている作家のような作品を書いてやろうとさえ思ったが、やめる。それは、第一に作之助の自尊心であった。が、もう一つの支えを見つけた。そのときに初めてはっきりと、意識したものがある。大阪である。思想好みで、抽象的観念を高しとするのは、明らかに東京ではないか。悪罵は、そこから発している。彼らが徒党を組んでたむろする文壇は、東京にあった。むしろ憧れていた東京なのだが、このとき以来にわかに変わった。自分の文学が大阪的であることを強調する。［略］京阪だけは東京文化に対抗できる伝統を持っている。［略］作之助の文学論は、すべてこのときの東京への反発から始まる。」(Ōtani (1998), 178-179)

[10] 「「土曜夫人」は、著者のいわゆる「可能性の文学」論の作品としての実験であり、作中の表現を籍りれば、「偶然というものの可能性を追究することによって、世相を泛び上らせようと云う作者の試み――」でもある。」(Aoyama (1970), 385)

fujin."[11] Others disagree. The writer Takami Jun wrote in his diary, "It's not that I completely refuse to recognize Oda. But *Doyō fujin* is no good! It's nothing more than tomfoolery and flirtation."[12] Keene, too, considers that "*The Saturday Wife*, for all Oda's devotion to the craft of the storyteller and his considerable novelistic skill, was a failure" (Keene (1984), 1087).

In the end, *Doyō fujin* may have been no more than Oda's attempt to tell an "interesting story." The publication of "Kanōsei no bungaku," followed by Oda's death just a few months later precipitated a debate on the place of fictionality in literary works (or re-ignited a debate, suspended during the war years, as to the proper form and content of fiction that had its roots in Yokomitsu Riichi's 1935 essay, "Junsui shōsetsu-ron" ("A Theory of the Pure Novel")) (Saitō (2020), 333-347). A variety of factors, such as the postwar resurgence of the newspaper-serialized novel, younger writers' impatience with the traditional I-Novel-inflected form, and perhaps reaction against wartime austerities, led to a new valuation of "amusement in fiction" (*"shōsetsu no omoshirosa"*) (Saitō, ibid.). As Oda himself wrote in "Kanōsei no bungaku":

> I want to pursue the question of whether the "literature of possibility" is in fact possible. It is not as if I have a clear theory of the "literature of possibility." I simply believe that, with regard to the possibilities of the works I may write from now on, I need to make a clear break with the traditional novel in Japan, that abhors even a single line of fiction.[13]

Other late works of Oda's, such as "Sesō" and "Shinkei" ("Nerves"), both from 1946, depict a novelist protagonist considering various materials for writing as he wanders the postwar Osaka streets. To this extent, they resemble a variation of the I-Novel. But they also show a boundless curiosity toward people's stories and a ceaseless questioning of these stories and their suitability as literature. Oda seemingly never stopped asking himself the question he asks toward the end of "Kanōsei no bungaku": "Is the 'literature of possibility,' after all, possible?"[14]

2. "Kanōsei no bungaku" and Osaka Conversational Skill

Oda's essay opens with a lengthy discussion of Sakata Sankichi, a recently-deceased Osaka *shōgi* player.[15] Oda explains at length Sakata's "foolish" playing at an important match against two high-ranking Tokyo *shōgi* players. In his match against Master Kimura, Sakata moved a pawn (*fuhyō*) at the edge of the board – in effect, a wasted move – in spite of the fact that he played second. The outcome was his defeat in the match. In the second match, against 8-dan-ranked Hanada, Sakata again moved a pawn at the edge of the board – the only difference being that he moved a pawn at the right edge of the board, instead of on the left, as he had done in the previous match. Oda sees Sakata's reckless moves as a stubborn challenge to the "orthodoxy" of *shōgi,* in which only two possible opening moves were considered "standard moves" (*jōseki*). This discussion serves as the introduction to Oda's own challenge to the orthodoxy of the Japanese literary establishment.

Oda had previously written of Sakata and his reckless moves in these matches in two stories of 1943, "Chō-u" ("Listening to the Rain") and "Shōbu-shi" ("The Competitor") (Saitō (2020)). "Chō-u" relates various episodes from Sakata's life, focusing on Sakata's reckless move in his match against Master Kimura, from the viewpoint of a first-person narrator (a persona of Oda), who is implicitly compared to Sakata. In "Shōbu-shi," the same first-person narrator recalls his previous story and comments that "In Sakata, I had seen my own possibilities."[16] In this story, the narrative focuses on Sakata's reckless move in the *second* match, against Hanada. Saitō (2020) points out that in "Shōbu-shi," Oda "repeats the same experiment –

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[11] 「織田作之助は偶然と嘘をつく才能とで、彼のいう人間の可能性を追及しようとしていた。それが一番華やかに、一番完璧性をもって結晶し、流露したのがこの「土曜夫人」であった。」("Kaisetsu," quoted in Saitō (2020), 308)

[12] 「織田君を私は全面的に認めないのではない。しかし「土曜夫人」は、いかん！痴態と媚態以外に何もないじゃないか。」(Quoted in Saitō (2020), 317)

[13] 「私には「可能性の文学」が果たして可能か、その追究をして行きたいのである。「可能性の文学」という明確な理論が私にあるわけではない。私はただ今後書いて行くだろう小説の可能性に関しては、一行の虚構も毛嫌いする日本の伝統的小説とはっきり訣別する必要があると思うのだ。」(Oda (1946/1999), 240-241)

[14] 「「可能性の文学」は果たして可能であろうか」(Oda (1946/1999), 261)

[15] Sakata Sankichi (1870-1946) was the subject of a 1947 play *Ōshō*, which was made into a popular film of the same name in 1948. The film spawned, in turn, the popular 1961 song "Ōshō."

[16] 「坂田の中に私の可能性を見た」(Quoted in Saitō (2020), 72)

writing about himself by writing about Sakata – a second time,"[17] just as Sakata had attempted his unorthodox move not once but twice. According to Saitō (2020), these two stories themselves, especially the second, are in their own way Oda's own challenges to the orthodoxy of the literary establishment.

"Kanōsei no bungaku," then, might be seen as a challenge to the orthodoxy of the literary-critical essay. By refusing to conform to the orthodoxy of a literary theory that would be (in Keene's terms) "systematic" and "precise," the essay is itself an embodiment of a kind of "literature of possibility." As the essay encourages writers to use fiction to write "interesting novels," it couches its argument, not in coldly logical and coherent rhetoric, but in an overflowing grab-bag of anecdote, personal experience, reported conversations, and subtle (and not-so-subtle) digs at specific authors and the boring, orthodox works they write. Oda expands the possibilities of the literary-critical essay by writing an essay that is interesting and enjoyable to read.

In this sense, Oda's essay conforms to a cultural norm for Osaka dialect, according to which speech (conversation) should be interesting (*omoroi*). Wakagi (2011) maintains that "Osaka people rarely reply 'Yes'." If one simply says "yes," the conversation "can't go on from there." On the other hand, if one avoids "yes," "the conversation will naturally continue" (14).[18] She continues, "'Yes' as a reply is the bare minimum, and it can indicate that the conversation need not continue any longer."[19] Osakans, on the other hand, would rather enjoy their conversations, as indicated, for example, in chapter titles in Onoe (1999): Chapter 2 is entitled *"Nanna to iwana, omoshironai"* ("It ain't interesting unless you say *something*"), and Chapter 3 is *"Sekkaku mono o yūte kureteru no ya kara"* ("The other party's going out of his way to talk to you, so…"). Kinsui (2025) introduces the example of a shopkeeper who returns the customer's change of three hundred yen with the words, "Here you go, three million yen" (*"Hai, sambyaku man'en"* instead of *"Hai, sambyakuen"*), and comments, "This is a business transaction, an important act for a merchant, by which he earns his sustenance, a scene demanding accuracy above all, but still he coats the act with play, like the batter of tempura."[20] He concludes, "Osakans' communication is rich in play and in acting."[21]

It is just this "play" and *"enshutsu"* (a word that means "production" (of a play), "delivery" (of a speech) as much as "acting" (of a role)) that Oda makes sure to include in "The Literature of Possibility," even though, needless to say, the essay treats serious matters and is, for a writer like Oda, "an important act… by which he earns his sustenance." It is this that makes "The Literature of Possibility" more than simply an ill-conceived and confused literary theory, or a personal attack on Shiga Naoya and his epigones, or the "sour grapes" of an Osaka underdog in the face of the Tokyo literary establishment's hegemony. The following quotation provides just one example of the humor in which Oda couches the serious points he wishes to make.

> …readers, critics, and audiences are gullible. / They tend to forget that novelists, no less than theologians, educators, politicians, and con artists, are great liars. Even after they have been taken in and suffered bitter experiences several times, they still tend to think that novelists are people who only write things that really happened. Even distinguished university professors with long beards (though it is not their beards that make them distinguished) seem to be under the impression that novelists always have models for their characters, and write only about things that really happened… [A university professor] asked me to lend him a copy of the court records of the trial of Abe Sada. He knew I had written about these court records in my story "The State of the Times." I explained at great length that "The State of the Times" was a made-up story; that I'd never read any such court records; that the master of the *tempura* restaurant who had Abe Sada as his mistress and the draft of "Ten-Sen Geisha" and the story of the repatriated soldier and the mistress of the bar "Dice" and the "I" in the story were all fictional, but the university professor wouldn't believe me. Exasperated, I told him that not only did I write lies in that story, I tried to see just how many lies I could pack into one story, in order to test the possibilities of lies… Hearing this abstruse explanation, he finally seemed to believe me; but he still wanted those court records.
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> (Oda (1946/1999), 243-44)

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[17] 「坂田を書くことで自分も書く、という試みをもう一度繰り返し」(Saitō (2020), 75)

[18] 「大阪の人は「はい」という返事をあまりしない。」(Wakagi (2011), 14) Wakagi (2011) highlights this in the title of her book, *"Hai" to iwanai Osaka-jin (Osakans Don't [Just] Say "Yes").*

[19] 「「はい」というのは最低限の返事で、それ以上会話しなくてもいいきっかけにもなる。」(Wakagi (2011), 15)

[20] 「商取引という、商売人にとって日々の糧を得る、重要な行為であり、何より正確性が求められる場面ではあるが、そこに遊戯性を天ぷらの衣のようにまぶして、楽しんでいるのである。」(Kinsui (2025), 176)

[21] 「[略] 大阪人のコミュニケーションが遊戯性・演出性に富んで」いる。(Kinsui (2025), 178)

Over and above the serviceability of Oda's essay as literary theory, it is simply enjoyable to read. Reading "The Literature of Possibility" is similar to an experience Kō Hiroki (an editor and writer from Osaka) had reading a work by Machika Kō (a writer and former punk rocker also from Osaka): "Machida's extraordinary 'anything goes' writing, that hurries the reader on to the end in one go, does not allow any doubts such as 'So what exactly was this work all about?'"[22] Kō then introduces a quotation from the columnist Odajima Takashi:

> What a column conveys is not a "cargo" such as "facts" or "the results of research" or a "message." We want to convey the boat itself. In fact, columnists are not people who cross the ocean to convey cargo, but those who raise their sails for the voyage itself. / In other words, even if the boat is empty, as long as its lines are beautiful, or it leaves a vivid wake, or, failing that, if it at least sinks splendidly, then the column is a success.[23]

In "The Literature of Possibility," the "cargo" may not be a completely logical and systematic literary theory, but the "voyage" of reading Oda's essay is entertaining. His medium – the rhetoric of "interesting conversation" – takes precedence over his message. His rhetoric challenges the orthodoxy of a "serious" literary-critical essay, just as the message of the essay challenges the orthodoxy of the literature of the time. In the end, Oda's rhetoric *is* his message.

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[22] 「一気に最後まで読ませる町田さんの何でもアリのとてつもない文章は、「結局、何の話やねん。この文書は」と訝ることを許さない。」(Kō (2018), 163)

[23] 「コラムが運んでいるのは「事実」や「研究の結果」や「メッセージ」のような、「積荷」ではない。わたくしどもは船そのものを運んでいる。つまるところ、コラムニストとは、積荷を運ぶために海を渡るのではなく、航海それ自体のために帆を上げる人間たちを指す言葉なのだ。／ということはつまり、空っぽの船であっても、そのフォルムが美しく、あるいは航海が鮮烈ならば、でなくても、最低限沈みっぷりが見事であるのなら、それはコラムとして成功しているのである。」(Quoted in Kō (2018), 164)

The Literature of Possibility

By Oda Sakunosuke

Translated by Andrew Murakami-Smith

Sakata Sankichi is dead. He died in July of this year, at the age of 77. There are many unique people in Osaka, but we are unlikely to see anyone as eccentric as Sakata Sankichi again. Even in the world of shōgi, where obstinacy, eccentricity, and strange habits are common, we will probably never again see the likes of Sakata.

Sakata, uneducated and illiterate, could not read game notations, could not write sealed moves in cases of adjournment, had no sensei, and developed his own unique style of play, "Sakata Shōgi," the most unconventional even in the unconventional Kansai shōgi world. His style, hailed as artless and uncontrived, took the shōgi world by storm, and at one time Sakata even called himself "Osaka Master," but in his later years he did not play well. No: throughout his life was not Sakata – uneducated, illiterate, knowing nothing but shōgi, unable to socialize or meet people without an intermediary, keeping his address secret and never opening the front door to anyone, a lonely "fool for shōgi" – though his impish obstinacy was popular with the crowd, was not his whole life dogged by the shadow of tragedy? He lived in terrible poverty until middle age. In the old days, shōgi players had no set income, and, dunned by loansharks and unable to buy rice, he would bet money on his own games, lose, and come home stripped even of his kimono. Once his wife even took their two children and went looking for a place to commit mother-and-child suicide. In later years, on her deathbed, his wife's last words to him were, "If you must play shōgi, at least try not to play like a fool." "Got it," Sakata replied. Inspired, he rose to become a player capable of putting even Master Sekine on the run, and called himself "Osaka Master." But his self-conferred title caused other players to shun matches with him. Then in 1937, the 68-year-old Sakata had his first match in 16 years, against the two 8-dan shōgi stars of the day, Kimura and Hanada. At that time, Kimura and Hanada were ranked first and second in the upcoming title match to decide a new Master after the retirement of Master Sekine, so for either of them to lose to Sakata would cast doubt on his fitness for the title of Master. The reputation of Tokyo shōgi was also at stake: they could not afford to lose. But for Sakata, too, this would be a chance to show the world the meaning of his 16-year silence, and the true value of "Sakata Shōgi," in essence a once-in-a-lifetime match, on which he staked his whole career. The Yomiuri Newspaper, sponsor of the match, proclaimed it "The Greatest Shōgi Match of the Shōwa Era." But in this match Sakata did in fact "play like a fool," and lost. Confident that he could win even if he lost the important piece called the *Kaku*,[1] Sakata played with no handicap, and suffered crushing defeats in both games.

Among Sakata's famous words is the phrase "Silver is weeping." In a poor move, the piece known as Silver or the Silver General[2] has been placed where it cannot advance and cannot retreat, and is weeping at its misfortune. The Silver weeps on behalf of Sakata's own heart, weeps with the chagrin of having made a foolish move – that is the meaning of this phrase. These words are fitting for Sakata, who saw the shōgi board as his life and the pieces as his heart, and will be remembered as a famous saying of this uneducated, illiterate man. The unique picture painted by this saying could only have been painted by Sakata, and it could be said that it fatefully symbolizes Sakata's entire life. In the end, the saying, "Silver is weeping" was the only thing Sakata had to show for his life, in which the wife he had put through so much hardship died with the words "don't play like a fool" on her lips, his daughter ran off with a man, and then, in the match of his career, he did in fact "play foolishly" and lost. Sakata's shōgi skill was at one time proclaimed to be so peerless that the 81-square shōgi board was too small for him. But, by the standards of today's professional shōgi, he would be no more than 6- or 7-dan, and not someone to be remembered down the ages as a genius shōgi player. If he were playing today, all we could say of him would be, "Silver is weeping; Sakata is alive." But for me, it is not this famous saying but his "foolish playing" in the match of his career that I would like to memorialize as Sakata's masterpiece.

What kind of "foolish playing" was it? As his first move, Sakata moved the pawn[3] at one edge of the board from 9-c to 9-d. In a game without handicaps, the first move is always to open a way for the *Kaku*,

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[1] *Kaku* (角) or *kakugyō* (角行) in Japanese. A piece that can move an unlimited number of spaces diagonally in any direction, like the bishop in chess.

[2] *Gin* (銀) or *ginshō* (銀将), which can move one space diagonally or directly forward.

[3] *Fuhyō* (歩兵) in Japanese.

or to move the pawn that stands in front of the *Hisha*[4]. These are the standard moves[5]. This is true no matter who plays. Whether Master or amateur, these are the only two opening moves. The only time you would move a pawn at the edge is when there is no other move you can make, or when you have essentially attained your desired arrangement of pieces for the initial stage of the game, or when you want to bide your time and see how your opponent will move. And even then, unless you are very careful, there is a danger that your opponent will simply ignore your move. Thus, to move a pawn at the edge as your opening move is rash – reckless, crazy. And Kimura, ranked 8-dan (now a Master) did in fact ignore Sakata's move. Since Sakata moved second, losing a piece at this point meant he was two moves behind from the get-go. And to lose two moves and still expect to beat Kimura, representative of the Tokyo-style shōgi that had by this time largely perfected the swift-moving Double-wing Attack, proved impossible. This opening move of the pawn at the edge proved Sakata's undoing; he suffered a crushing defeat. But in the following match against Hanada, Sakata again moved the pawn at the edge on his first move. This time he moved the pawn on the right edge instead of on the left, but it was a pawn at the edge nonetheless. And Sakata suffered another crushing defeat. This was his "foolish playing."

However, regardless of how foolish it was of him to move the pawn at the edge, this was a move that showed the youthful spirit of Sakata, who had always played a headstrong kind of shōgi. We cannot but be exasperated at Sakata's over-confidence, making such a move not once but twice in a once-in-a-lifetime match, but are we not even more surprised at Sakata's youthful spirit, in trying this unprecedented new move at the age of 68, and in a once-in-a-lifetime match? There must have been other ambitious shōgi players who toyed with the idea of moving a pawn at the edge. Even Hanada 8-dan seems to have thought vaguely that moving a pawn at the edge might be possible, if you have the first move. But no one actually made the experiment. Up to the present day and probably for the foreseeable future, Sakata has been the one and only player to try such an experiment when he had the second move, in an important match. This move was Sakata's challenge to the standard moves, the orthodoxy of the shōgi world. A shōgi board is limited to 81 squares, but moving a single piece can lead to countless permutations, and the possibilities of those permutations, like the possible changes a single chance occurrence might bring to a person's life, are infinite. Innumerable shōgi matches have been played down the ages, but not a single one of them was identical to another. Similarly, innumerable stories have been written down the ages, but none of them are exactly alike. However, there is something that limits these possibilities. This is the "standard moves," the orthodoxy of the conventions of literature. By challenging the standard moves, Sakata Sankichi tried to expand the possibilities of shōgi. At the time, the Double-wing Attack had been brought to a certain level of perfection, both theoretically and in practice, by Tokyo-based shōgi players, and it had the highest authority as standard moves in non-handicapped shōgi. But now, these Double-wing Attack standard moves are no longer popular, and young players, unceasingly seeking to discover strategies other than the Double-wing Attack, try new moves in every match. Leaving aside the question of whether moving a pawn at the edge was a good or bad move, the experiment of the 68-year-old Sakata was, from the point of view of pursuing the possibilities of shōgi, a great leap. However, surveying Japanese literature, an anemic orthodoxy still has the highest authority; the old masters take not a step outside the old-style standard moves, and even new writers furtively adhere to them.

In the literary establishment in Japan at present, there are almost no antitheses to the standard moves. Shōgi can be found only in Japan, but literature can be found the world over. But Japanese literature, accepting the standard moves of the traditional novel in Japan as the highest authority, does not try to pursue the possibilities of literature. Abroad, the modern novel is the "literature of possibility," and one could say that its depiction of the possibilities of human beings and its pursuit of the formal possibilities of the novel clearly distinguish it from the traditional novel in Japan. As it does not encompass possibility, the traditional novel in Japan is itself a standard move in the narrow sense, but since the modern novel abroad contains infinite possibilities, it is not reified into a standard move. The "literature of possibility" always includes the possibility of moving a pawn on the edge of the board. Six years ago, when my debut work "Hooray for Marriage, or Sweet Beans for Two"[6] was selected as a Recommended Work by the Kaizōsha publishing house, I wrote about how I saw the story as "something like moving a pawn at the edge of the board," but in fact I was only moving a pawn at the edge of the board because I had no other move to make. In the face of the authority of the traditional novel in Japan, there was nothing else I could do. The work did include a bit

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[4] 飛車, which can move an unlimited number of spaces forward, back, left, or right, like the rook in chess.

[5] *Jōseki* (定跡) in Japanese. Accepted moves which, although not required, embody conventional wisdom.

[6] 「夫婦善哉」("Meoto zenzai"), 1940.

of antithesis, but I was not moving a pawn on the edge of the board to expand the possibilities of the modern novel. My impression at the time was that Kambayashi Atsuki's attack on the work was not unreasonable. Kambayashi said that the work "doesn't seem as if it were written by a new author; it's out of sync with the literary establishment, and makes me want to turn my face away." At the same time, I was dissatisfied: the autobiographical works Kambayashi wrote did nothing but follow the standard moves; they had none of the lamentation of moving a pawn at the edge because there are no other moves to make, let alone the newness of moving a pawn at the edge to expand the Modern Novel. Kambayashi, writing from the point of view of an I-Novelist who seems to pray three times before writing each word, strongly declares his dislike of Okamoto Kanoko's works, in which we can see at least a little effort to depict human possibility. Kambayashi runs counter to the path that leads to the modern novel: never writing a coincidence, never writing fiction, he writes about a final settling of accounts with life, but never about the possibilities of life, shutting himself up within the confines of the traditional novel in Japan, which has as its goal to look at the world though dying eyes[7]. He is a true representative of the literary establishment.

From a young age, I wanted to become a playwright, and, feeling no attraction for fiction, read hardly any novels. But at the age of 26, I read Stendhal, and was possessed by the attraction of the novel for the first time. However, infected by the accepted theories of the time, according to which "the literature of Stendhal or Balzac is, in the end, nothing more than made-up stories; the I-Novel of Japan, in the form of the mental-attitude novel, is Pure Literature, and, along with poetry, stands at the pinnacle of serious literature," and thinking I would never learn how to write fiction in Japanese just from reading translations, I read the celebrated works of the day, of the autobiographical fiction, mental-attitude novel, and I-Novel stripe, which forced on me a kind of nostalgia: "Ah, so this kind of novel, this kind of writing, this kind of attitude are the best." But this increased my dilemma. I had learned to see through dying eyes before I had any chance to pursue human possibility. At the time, I had been thinking vaguely that a Pure Novel should be something impure. I had been thinking about "Pure Theater," and had reached the conclusion that the purer a play was, the simpler and plainer its form would be, with something like the *nō* drama being its acme. But as for the Pure Novel, I believed that the purer it was, the more impure its form would become, the more complicated, its structure woven on more layers, ignoring perspective, and the distance between the characters and the writer varying like the camera angle in a movie, the eye and the hand betraying one another, and the farther it would recede from unitary description and the order of the figurative arts. I believed that for the novel, nothing should be off-limits. I even thought that the novel did not necessarily have to be art. However, literature in Japan esteems, not possibility, but depth within limits; considers obedience to authority to be sincerity; thinks of even a single line of lies as soot in one's eye; and prefers in all things the bland taste of green tea on rice[8]. This way of thinking has been given authority as orthodoxy, and against it I quietly tried to posit an antithesis, but at the same time, I put on the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia. This was my dilemma. But recently I have finally made up my mind to challenge this orthodoxy. This is not rebellion for the sake of rebellion. I want to pursue the question of whether the "literature of possibility" is in fact possible. It is not as if I have a clear theory of the "literature of possibility." I simply believe that, with regard to the possibilities of the works I may write from now on, I need to make a clear break with the traditional novel in Japan, that abhors even a single line of fiction. The traditional novel in Japan has its good points, as does new literature from abroad; some may say it is not necessary to burn one's bridges and choose one or the other. But rather than taking a little from here, a little from there, collecting the best characteristics and rounding off until you have a work with all the 36 characteristics of an archetypical beauty[9], I would rather write a work like a beauty who is somewhat flawed but fascinating.

Readers, critics, and audiences are gullible. Why, just the other day at a literary lecture, I started talking about Arabic, saying that the word "kyakkya," that appears in a novel of mine now being serialized in the Yomiuri Newspaper[10], is actually Arabic, and means "to sleep solitary and alone;" long ago the Arabs, being quite Epicurean, would never sleep alone after the age of 16, but once, a youth traveling across the

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[7] The phrase "dying eyes" (*matsugo no me*) was used by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, who held that the beauty of the world was most appreciable to the eyes of one who is resolved to die. The phrase was also used as the title of an essay by Kawabata Yasunari. Both Akutagawa and Kawabata committed suicide.

[8] *Ochazuke* in Japanese. A light, non-filling dish of hot tea poured over rice, usually with other toppings such as dried seaweed, salmon flakes, pickled plum, etc.

[9] Probably akin to the "Thirty-two Characteristics of the Buddha" as set forth in the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra (*Dai hannyaharamitta kyō* in Japanese).

[10] 『土曜夫人』(*A Saturday Wife*), serialized from August to December, 1946. In fact, Oda's final work, left unfinished at the time of his death in January, 1947.

desert with a caravan became separated from his companions, and had to spend the night alone in the bleak desert. Lying there by solitary and alone, he looked up at the sky and saw a shooting star. Unable to stand his homesickness and loneliness, the youth yelled out a certain word, and this was "kyakkya." In Arabia up to that time, there had been no human language, and so "kyakkya" was the first word ever invented in Arabia; thereafter, all Arabic words except for the Allah Mode (that is, the prayers of Mode) were formed on the basis of this "kyakkya." In fact, "kyakkya" can be seen as an all-purpose word in human life; everything from the "waaah" of a newborn baby to the "gya" of the death-rattle is based on "kyakkya." The reason why sleeping solitary and alone is said to feel like biting sand is that, when that youth said "kyakkya," the first Arabic word, a wind happened to arise on the desert and blew sand into his mouth, I expounded. Further, to elaborate, although I do not believe in the Theory of Evolution, "kyakkya" actually evolved from the cries of monkeys, said to be the ancestors of the human race. I went on in this vein, but the audience seemed to be listening attentively with deep respect. They probably thought that their lecturer was a very learned man, but as I talked on, I was not at all sure whether there was in fact a desert in Arabia, or whether monkeys had once lived there, and I was filled with trepidation lest someone ask a question. It happened that a student who was in the audience that day went to visit Ikushima Ryōichi, the translator of Stendhal, the next day, and told him about "kyakkya." Mr. Ikushima knows some Arabic, but had never heard the word "kyakkya." Said he to the student, "Perhaps it is classical Arabic; it is troublesome that no Arabic-Japanese dictionary yet exists. But Oda is quite learned; I have a new respect for him." As I said, readers, critics, and audiences are gullible.

They tend to forget that novelists, no less than theologians, educators, politicians, and con artists, are great liars. Even after they have been taken in and suffered bitter experiences several times, they still tend to think that novelists are people who only write things that really happened. Even distinguished university professors with long beards (though it is not their beards that make them distinguished) seem to be under the impression that novelists always have models for their characters, and write only about things that really happened, just as they happened, and that to write a novel one must do fieldwork. They even console one with words like, "You novelists have to do all your research on the ground, you have to travel, and study women as well – how many pains you must take!" Recoiling, I said, "I would never write anything real; they're all lies," but he replied, "Of course, of course, you have to make it dramatic or it wouldn't be a novel. But Yoshiya Nobuko[11] must have experience with men – she writes some quite racy things." And this from a university professor of literature with a long beard – I was dumbfounded. What does he mean by "Of course, of course"? And what does he know about Yoshiya Nobuko? As I listened in disgust, he asked me to lend him a copy of the court records of the trial of Abe Sada. He knew I had written about these court records in my story "The State of the Times." I explained at great length that "The State of the Times" was a made-up story; that I'd never read any such court records; that the master of the *tempura* restaurant who had Abe Sada as his mistress and the draft of "Ten-Sen Geisha" and the story of the repatriated soldier and the mistress of the bar "Dice" and the "I" in the story were all fictional, but the university professor wouldn't believe me. Exasperated, I told him that not only did I write lies in that story, I tried to see just how many lies I could pack into one story, in order to test the possibilities of lies; lies are the instinct of the novel; just as human beings have instincts like appetites for sex, food, and so on, if the novel itself can be said to have an instinct, it is the instinct of the "possibility of lies." Hearing this abstruse explanation, he finally seemed to believe me; but he still wanted those court records.

At present I am in Tokyo, and a few hours before starting to write this manuscript at my lodgings in a back street near the Ginza, I was drinking at the bar Lupin with Dazai Osamu and Sakaguchi Angō – to be precise, Dazai was drinking beer, Sakaguchi was drinking whiskey, and I, as I knew I would be confined to my room for the rest of the night to write this manuscript, was drinking coffee. The conversation turned to a certain trendy novelist, and Sakaguchi said, "He uses his novels as a tool to pick up women, but he's an idiot." Whereupon Dazai said in his Tsugaru[12] dialect, "We couldn't use our works to pick up women even if we tried. Women get creeped out by the kind of works we write, and even if we tried to pick them up, it's bound to fail." I completely agreed with him, but a little while before, as we hurried toward Lupin in the rain, Dazai had said to me, "I bet you feel forsaken, Oda, it's hard to get ripped apart by the critics time after time like you do." But I answered, "I'm grateful for your sympathy, Dazai, but don't worry about me. It's only because I'm so good-looking that the critics rip me apart. If I wasn't so handsome, the critics would praise me." That's how confident I am in my own looks. Hayashi Fumiko[13] allowed that I have much more of a

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[11] Female novelist (1896-1973) who wrote serialized romance novels, girls' fiction, and lesbian literature.

[12] Aomori Prefecture.

[13] Popular female writer (1903 or 1904-1952), author of *Vagabond's Diary, Floating Clouds*, and myriad other works. One

clean youthfulness and modernity than she had been led to suspect from reading my works, but in fact, the reason my success rate with women approaches zero is my novels. Even Hayashi Fumiko, who's in the same business, imagined a squat man of 150 centimeters or so, dressed like a head clerk in a merchant's apron, until she met the real me, a svelte 175 centimeters, so there's no telling what kind of grubby person readers imagine upon reading my works. There's nothing I can do about it if they imagine someone as filthy as bacteria, but I'd rather they didn't imagine someone *too* ugly. The day before yesterday I did a radio broadcast at the crack of dawn under the title, "Eroticism and Literature." The announcer who introduced me was a young woman in the flower of maidenhood, and as soon as she started to say, "And now we have a talk on Eroticism…" she glanced at me and blushed to the roots of her ears. My talk, which was supposed to go on for 15 minutes, was over in 10 minutes, so in the five minutes remaining, I yelled, "Ladies and gentlemen, I write those kinds of stories, but I'm not that kind of man." I intended to go on to explain the meaning of "that kind," and then to say that, the meaning of "that kind" having been defined, I don't mind being thought of as "that kind" of man, but since I write nothing but lies in my works, readers should not be deceived. But if I *had* said those things, it would probably have been an even greater screw-up, since women hate liars.

Therefore, I don't want to emphasize more than necessary the fact that writers are liars, but… For example: after parting from Dazai and Sakaguchi at the Lupin, I came back to my lodgings with an editor for this magazine, N, gentle on the outside but with an iron will at the core, and, in fear of the look in N's eyes, which said he would not fail to make me complete this article by morning, I started in like an innocent to write about this great issue, the "literature of possibility," when suddenly a huge drunk, tall enough to reach the clouds, comes bursting into the room, saying he's on the run from a woman of the night and has nowhere to turn, the woman's an idiot, she won't turn loose of me, she's a regular Kiyohime,[14] you gotta hide me here for tonight – I saw that it was Sakaguchi, who I had just taken leave of at the Lupin. Handing us some fancy cigarettes, he said, "Here, I'll give you these cigarettes, I got them from that woman," but we had just seen him get those cigarettes from the master of the Lupin. As this shows, Sakaguchi Angō is a liar. And when I discovered that he is a liar, he went up in my estimation. To me, there's no point to a writer who is not a liar. I find it hard to believe that Sakaguchi Angō, while lying in real life, would sit down to write a novel with an earnest look on his face, attempting to avoid all lies. He should realize from his own example that the pleasure of telling lies is, at the same time, love of the truth. Japanese novelists who are pre-disposed to drink seem to be unaware of this fact, and this may be impoverishing the Japanese novel.

By concentrating its efforts over the course of several decades on the development of the mental-attitude-novel branch of the I-Novel, in the writing of which one prays three times before inscribing each word, the Japanese literary establishment has made great contributions to the regression of the form of the novel, and has thereby been highly successful at going against the entire ideology of the Modern Novel.

Human efforts are a strange thing. As far as efforts go, over the past few years, the military, the government, and the citizens, each in their own small way, have made great efforts, but those efforts turned out to have been efforts to lead Japan to defeat. In the same way, the efforts of the Japanese literary establishment have turned out to be efforts for the impoverishment of the Japanese novel. Perhaps there was no malicious intent involved, but when accepted opinion – according to which the mental-attitude-novel-type I-Novel like those of Shiga Naoya is the epitome of the novel – when this accepted opinion is invested with such authority that it becomes sacred, then discussing Shiga Naoya's works becomes nothing more than worshipping Shiga Naoya. Then we must say that the conventional wisdom committed an unintentional sin.

It is not my intent to play word games to repudiate Shiga Naoya's literature. I freely acknowledge Shiga Naoya's innovation, his natural disposition for writing, his efforts to elevate the dignity of the novel to a level at which it could be appreciated as a work of art, and the literary genius that allowed him to create a model of concise vernacular Japanese, thus affording even amateurs an opportunity to study literary style. On these points, I am perfectly willing to recognize Shiga's achievements. But I do not hesitate to declare that it was culpable to make Shiga's novels the orthodoxy and the mainstream of the Japanese novel. The mental-attitude-novel-type I-Novel is no more than a tributary, a side channel of the great river of the novel. It is much too small a stream to float the great ship of human possibility. It is not the main channel. In order to reach the great ocean of the Modern Novel, the mental attitude novel must first be absorbed into the main

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of the most commercially successful writers of either gender in the immediate postwar period.

[14] From the legend of Anchin and Kiyohime, dramatized in plays. Anchin, a young, handsome monk on a pilgrimage to the Kumano Shrines, stayed at the house of the steward of a local manor. The steward's daughter Kiyohime fell in love with Anchin at first sight. To protect his vow of celibacy as a monk, Anchin attempted to escape, but Kiyohime, transformed into a snake by her passion and rage, pursued him into the Dōjōji Temple. The monks of the temple hid Anchin under the temple bell, but Kiyohime found him and coiled around the bell, and the fires of her passion and rage burned Anchin alive.

channel of the river. The novels of Shiga Naoya, for example, may have perfected a certain element of the novel, but have not developed the possibilities of the novel. This should have been obvious to anyone who has thought even a little about the novel – particularly about the ideology of the Modern Novel. However, thanks to the authority of the idea that with Shiga the novel had reached its apotheosis, and thanks to the fact that many of the writers and critics of Japan had been influenced, to some extent, if not by Shiga's novels as such, then by his point of view, his attitude, and his writing style, the idea that the novel had already reached its perfect form as the art of "neither too close nor too far" took precedence in the pursuit of the possibilities of the Modern Novel. Further, this situation has continued even in the postwar literary establishment: the academism of the Iwanami publishing house has been resurrected with the publication of Shiga's "Gray Moon," and as for the literary establishment, the leading literary magazine *Shinchō* has been up to its ears in its work of debuting new imitators of Shiga Naoya. Even now the literary establishment in Japan is preoccupied with launching toy boats fit for a small creek: is this what editors really want, or is it the fastidiousness of a literary establishment that keeps washing its hands in a small rivulet? This fastidiousness forgets the strong hands of Balzac's ruffians as it furtively continues to cleanse its own hands in a small rivulet, thus serving only to further weaken its skin. It's something like a fussy sign reading, "Urinating Prohibited Here." Though the literary establishment's heart is so weak that it would probably faint away at the appearance of someone like Stendhal, with his 171 pen-names and aliases, it mistakes the reddening of its anemic skin with rubbing and cold water for the ruddy glow of health. "Gray Moon" does, of course, within the limits of the traditional novel in Japan, show the vision and skill of the Old Master, and one can imagine the effort and narrative ingenuity that went into turning the author's experience into the finished story "Gray Moon." However, the story should have begun from the point where "Gray Moon" ends; just because a vignette called "Gray Moon" was completed based on a personal experience does not signify the completion of the story. We might say that a story should have been written *based on* the vignette "Gray Moon." The conventions of the traditional novel in Japan commend the depiction of the student worker in the story, saying he has been depicted with neither excess nor deficiency, but what is "depiction with neither excess nor deficiency"? The education we have received from the Japanese literature of the past teaches us that depiction with neither excess nor deficiency is something like the discipline of Kobayashi Hideo's[15] "eyes that see without trying to see." Depiction with neither excess nor deficiency results from "eyes that see without trying to see," writing from "neither too close nor too far." This is the view of Japanese literature. It is the accepted opinion that this is the apotheosis of the novel, and this accepted opinion is followed by one and all. The imitators have a blind faith in this kind of depiction as a rule of novel-writing, and even writers of other stripes have a nostalgia for it. We can't hold up our heads and look it in the eye. But is it even possible to depict human beings with neither excess nor deficiency? And if we can assume that there is such a tradition in Japanese literature, is it a tradition that the younger generation should follow? Why do they not question the convention of depiction with neither excess nor deficiency? Wait – they say "depiction with neither excess nor deficiency," but when has Japanese literature ever depicted human beings with "excess"? They say "neither too close nor too far," but has Japanese literature ever approached too close to human beings? Can it be said that we have departed so far from the traditional novel in Japan, and wandered so long in the strange foreign lands of the Modern Novel, that we must feel nostalgic for the mental-attitude-novel-style I-Novel? Have the viewpoints and skill of rebellious expert writers pushed the possibilities of the Modern Novel so close to their limits that we must praise as unaffected new writers' works that are no more than diaries or essays, and accept them as novels on the literary scene? When writers like Toyoda Masako[16], Nozawa Fumiko[17], Naoi Kiyoshi[18], and the author of "Back-Street Workshop,"[19] recommended by the Association for New Japanese Literature[20], appear, must we feel nostalgia for their amateur, unadorned quality and lose our heads in applauding them? I heard that in a literary panel discussion, a certain writer of popular fiction

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[15] Literary critic (1902-1983), perhaps most famous for his essay "On Transience" ("Mujō to iu koto," 1946).

[16] Female essayist (1922-2010), first famous for an anthology of compositions published when she was in elementary school, published as a book in 1937 and made into a movie in 1938. Visited China as a correspondent during WWII, joined the Japanese Communist Party after the war, but left the party after opposition between the Communist Parties of Japan and China. Traveled to China during the Cultural Revolution.

[17] Left-leaning female writer (1921-2017), who joined the Communist Party after the war.

[18] Former soldier (1915-1997), confined to bed due to illness contracted in China, who became a disciple of Shiga Naoya and wrote *Seiryū* (*Clear-running River*) in 1943 (published 1946).

[19] By Ozawa Kiyoshi (1922-1955).

[20] Shin Nihon Bungaku Kai, a postwar organization of writers with proletarian leanings (including the well-known Miyamoto Yuriko), but which distanced itself from the Japanese Communist Party after 1950.

confessed to a writer of serious literature that "Our mistake was trying to write interesting stories," but has Japanese literature, serious or popular, ever had this interest proper to the novel tradition, going back to *The Arabian Nights* and *The Decameron*? Is Japanese Literature so high-calorie that we have grown tired of fatty novels and need to write bland green-tea-on-rice novels instead?

When there is a public exhibition of the treasures of the Shōsōin Temple, tens of thousands of people – every Tom, Dick, and Harry – board long-distance trains and electric commuter railways, and though they had their own independent identities as So-and-so back in such-and-such a place, once they have been shouted at by train conductors, had their feet stepped on, been pushed in the back, and swarmed together like maggots, it's enough to make them forget their independent identities as So-and-so; they fight their way to Nara and, with their last gasp, make the circuit respectfully viewing the treasures, and even the young people piously sigh, "Very nice, very nice." This is all very well, but if we could call this the cultural ideology of Japan, then they have become the Toms, Dicks, and Harrys of this cultural ideology; their feelings and their longing for beauty are truly touching. What a rebellious tomcat I must look as I refuse to go look at the Shōsōin treasures though I live not far from Nara, instead staying in bed sulking and looking at recent pictures of Jean Paul Sartre (his eye looking like a glass eye) in *Life* magazine.

A certain writer of popular novels, while having the nerves of steel to write novels with titles like *The Great Honeymooners' Driving Race*, when he appeared in a literary panel discussion, timidly put on the airs of a martyr to culture, lamenting the effect on Japanese culture of today's students, who read philosophy in the morning, and vulgar popular novels at night. Which in fact does he suggest they should be reading? No, he would probably answer that they should go see the Shōsōin exhibition. If, among the Japanese arts, only the fine arts are worth looking at, then it is only natural to end up thinking that novels should be viewed as works of art. The reason it is impossible to write a novel while living in Nara is probably because the pen succumbs before the indescribable, simple pleasures taken from the works of the figurative arts. Before such works of art, all efforts to depict human possibility seem fruitless, and pursuing the possibilities of the novel form to create a Pure Novel, which by definition must be impure, seems like a vulgar artistic endeavor. Thus, by depicting the author's immediate surroundings and feelings with neither excess nor deficiency, from neither too close nor too far, writers attempt to create novels like works of art, whose highest goal is to be viewed as works of art. And the works they produce are straightforward and unembellished, but nothing more; as for interest, they are almost murderously dull. I am fed up with the state of the Japanese literary establishment, unchanged from yesterday until today, which forces us to read the works of these authors with respectful attention. Their literature, propped up by a *haiku*-like realism and a *tanka*-like lyricism, colored by the intellect of cultural ideology, tries to escape as quickly as possible into the state of perfection of the figurative arts. And these writers long for the jaded view of the aged, make their goal in life the kind of completion as a human being that is attainable by simple accumulation of years, like the growth rings of a tree – or, rather, a sober, rusty decrepitude, and think that to write down the final reckoning of such a life, just as it is and without adornment, is literature. And this final reckoning is sealed away just as it is, never to be used to develop the possibilities of others' lives. Among their works, the comparatively less mediocre works portray *how* they have lived their lives, but not the *possibilities* of how to live one's life. Kuwabara Takeo[21] said something to the effect that the reason Japanese literature is not interesting is that it lacks the idea of how one should live one's life, which can be found in foreign literature. I interpret this to mean, in effect, that the traditional novel in Japan does not depict human possibility. And this is only to be expected as long as the traditional novel in Japan accepts as its highest state "the view from dying eyes," and takes as its model, not music, which is a modern art, but instead the classical figurative arts, which no longer have any room for further development. The autobiographical works of Shiga Naoya and his epigones may once have been "close to human beings from afar," but I believe it cannot be denied that since then, their works have drawn further and further away from human beings. They may say they depict human beings, but in the end they only depict themselves, and moreover, in depicting themselves, they do not depict their own possibilities, but merely their immediate surroundings. When they depict others, they merely depict those others as they see them, without depicting those others' possibilities. They have no interest in people outside their own immediate surroundings, and cannot depict people outside those immediate surroundings. Is this due to their so-called artistic sincerity? Or is it because they do not love human beings, or perhaps because they lack talent? Their skill may be praised as superior, but I believe that a time will come when it is called clumsy.

[21] Literary critic and scholar of French literature and culture (1904-1988).

If it is not my intent to play word games, neither am I blurting out nonsense to vilify my senior writers. I have heard about that new writer of yore who brought about his own ruin by writing an article denigrating his senior writers. The mouth can be a gateway to disaster. Further, I know how hurtful unfavorable criticism can be. I have a literary career of only six years, but in those six years, every work I have published has faced unfavorable criticism, and at present, the situation seems only to be getting worse. A hasty relative of mine, seeing how every newspaper and magazine vilified my works using such abominable language as "low, facile, vulgar, the spirit of a craftsman and a merchant's soul, coarse, pornographic, typhus, poison, blasphemous against humanity, frivolous and flighty" and assuming that such unfavorable criticism must make it impossible for me to make a living as a writer, that the whole world ignored me, that not a single publisher would be willing to advance me 10 yen, and that I was probably on the verge of starvation, sent me a money order for 300 yen. The daughter of another relative came to me and blamed me for her failure to gain admittance to a girls' high school, saying it was because she had such an ill-famed person as me among her relatives. When word got around that a certain Old Master pronounced one of my works indecent and blasphemous against humanity, I had to check in to lodgings under an assumed name. In this way, unfavorable criticism can hurt one's feelings. That is why, instead of making those who attacked me feel awful by attacking their works in retaliation, I would rather hypocritically praise their works in the strongest possible terms, if I could. Nor do I wish to disturb the peaceful slumber of the gray-haired Old Masters by raising a loud cry outside their gates.

And I venture to write this essay not to defame the works of the Old Masters and their epigones, but because I believe that as long as the opinions of the literary establishment on their works – i.e., the accepted opinion that gives their works the highest authority – as long as these opinions tenaciously prevail, the Japanese literary establishment will have no shortage of unadorned works one must read with respectful attention, but no new literature will arise; the literature of possibility, the true Modern Novel, will never be born. I do not wish to put on airs as the single voice raised in indignation and lament for the sake of Japan's literary establishment, nor to guide or direct it, nor to take pride in being an influential voice within it, nor to get a thrill from making venomous remarks, nor to make a living from cataloging the faults of others. I am one who is thoroughly comfortable being a lone writer living in the Kansai far away from the literary establishment. But as the present state of the literary establishment remains unchanging, I feel sorry for the readers who buy literary magazines featuring exceedingly boring stories as their lead or final stories, and put up with reading unskilled, unreadable works by new writers, thinking they must be good because they are recommended by established writers, and I am greatly put out as a reader myself. I am put out when they tell me, "This is by the God of Fiction[22], so read it with respectful attention," or "This story is a purification rite performed by a priest of the God of Fiction, so at least recognize its earnestness." When you stop to think, it is a little strange that, though less than a century has passed since the beginning of the Meiji Era, works of Meiji and Taishō are already treated as classics, and their authors called the gods of literature. And once someone becomes a god, their authority is absolute, and their every word is treated as gospel. What laziness it is that no one doubts the authority of the literary establishment, even though in the wake of the war, everything that was formerly treated as authority and sacred is now viewed with skepticism. Even in a country like France, which has a tradition that includes many classics, there is constant rebellion against the classics, and an avant-garde movement tired of the orthodoxy of the Old Masters produces its 201st new writer. Julien Benda, writing in a recent French magazine, utterly repudiates the Old Masters like Valéry and Gide; meanwhile, Jean-Paul Sartre has proclaimed Existentialism, recently establishing in Paris an organ of the movement, the magazine *Les Temps Modernes*, and publishing as lead article a theory of Existentialist literature. They say there is such a vogue for the word "Existentialism" that you can even hear it in the subways of Paris, but in Japan, the only time people line up in front of a bookshop is on the issue date of one of the literary magazines featuring the Old Masters and serving as organs of Iwanami academism. Both France and Japan are invalid, riddled with uncertainty and confusion, and especially the younger generation, now skeptical of every established concept wrapped in the veil of tradition, has fallen into nihilism. These conditions have, in France, given birth to the intellectual necessity called Existentialism, which, by tearing away the veil of tradition that had enveloped human beings, contemplates the void, sees humans as grotesque, substitutes contingency for necessity, and sees in this the *ne plus ultra* of freedom. Now, I am not all that impressed by Sartre's story "Intimité" ("Intimacy")[23] – actually, I find more of the attraction of the new in

[22] *Shōsetsu no kamisama*, an epithet applied to Shiga Naoya.
[23] A story of 1939.

the deformation of Kästner's *Fabian*[24] – and it would be silly if two or three anti-orthodox writers were to proclaim a Japanese Existentialist movement. If we were to be labeled "Existentialist writers," I would either fall into consternation or be forced to say, with a bitter laugh, "Don't exaggerate! Why, in Japan, even the lyrical Nagai Kafū passes for pessimistic and flinty-hearted." In the first place, though the philosophers of Existentialism, from Heidegger and Kierkegaard on down, have for the most part been imported into Japan, it is the literary foundation that is lacking for an Existentialist literary movement. And even if an Existentialist movement were to rise as an antithesis to the established tradition of Japanese literature, that tradition is so weak that a mere antithesis to tradition would not immediately produce works such as "Intimacy," "The Wall,"[25] or *Nausea*.[26] Where, as in France, orthodoxy itself consists of the already-established Modern Novel – in other words, where there is a proper foundation – then antithetical works will be able to take an imposing form, but in Japan, where tradition consists of novels like works of the figurative arts, being antithetical merely produces conceptual I-Novels for literary youths, like a literary youth sentimentally confessing a drunken regret, so that, when they try to depict, for example, the human body, the body only appears conceptually. Works depicting the physical body are not physical – that is how little foundation the traditional novel in Japan has for creating something new – and its authority is accepted as gospel, something never to be transgressed! I cannot but be exasperated. Actually, the reason I have ventured to introduce Sartre is because I wanted to point out this lack of foundation on the part of Japanese literature.

Though Sartre's "Intimacy" is seemingly invalid literature produced by a sick France, it is in fact healthier than the seemingly healthy literature currently produced by a sick Japan. Existentialism had yet to be proclaimed when "Intimacy" was written in 1938, but Sartre's thought, that sees human beings as grotesque and contingent, already forms the background of the story. Though it is a most intellectual story, in fact it betrays fewer traces of cogitation than recent works in Japan, which have no thought in their backgrounds, and are most unintellectual. This is only to be expected, but it strikes us, inured to reading recent works in Japan, as something strange. "Intimacy" is not unornamented, but it is simple. For us in Japan, it is a fresh stimulus that in a country like France, where the Modern Novel has reached full maturity, Sartre, as his starting point for a new pursuit of human possibility, first dragged human possibility, that had already been pursued to its limits, back to a primitive state, and depicted the physical body stripped free of the veils of spirit and concepts. When human possibility is pursued, as, for example, when Stendhal pursues his own possibility – in other words, the possibilities of the individual passions of his characters Julien[27] or Fabrice[28] – he reifies human possibility into the archetypical "How should one live," thus even giving birth to words like "Beylism"[29] and "Sorelian."[30] Meanwhile, in "The Counterfeiters,"[31] Gide took the Modern Novel, which had been written within the frame of modern drama, and gave it a *hanamichi*[32] and a revolving stage, and then, while pretending it is a play, reveals that it is actually a movie with a play within a play when he turns the camera on the audience, and finally the author operating the camera appears in the frame simultaneously with the author acting on the stage with the other characters. Later he tried the complicated[33] format of the "behind the scenes" *Journal of The Counterfeiters*. Thus, taking a hint from Dostoyevsky, he pursued the possibilities of a confrontation between people, and, at the same time, transformed the formal possibilities of the Modern Novel. But Sartre, instead of starting where Stendhal and Gide left off, chose a different starting point from theirs, thereby opening a new window for the pursuit of possibility. Like an artist

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[24] A 1932 novel by German writer Erich Kästner (1899-1974), perhaps best known for his children's literature such as *Emil and the Detectives* (1929).

[25] A 1939 story by Sartre.

[26] Sartre's famous 1938 novel.

[27] Julien Sorel, character in Stendhal's 1830 novel *Le Rouge et le Noir (The Black and the Red)*.

[28] Fabrice del Dongo, character in Stendhal's 1839 novel *La Chartreuse de Parme* (*The Charterhouse of Parma*).

[29] A doctrine developed by Stendhal (his real name was Marie-Henri Beyle), also called by him "egotism," which "urges a deliberate following of self-interest… Its essence is inward, an intense study of the self… It ultimately proposes self-knowledge, not self-interest… the elite alone… may seek the supreme goal – happiness and the complete conscious realization of self – through self-analysis leading to self-knowledge…" ("Stendhal Facts," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, copyright 2010, The Gale Group, Inc. https://biography.yourdictionary.com/stendhal)

[30] Oda seems to think "Sorelian" refers to Julien Sorel, whereas in fact it refers to Georges Sorel (1847-1922), who, after the failure of Syndicalism (the international unionizing movement), advocated a "French integral nationalism," which bears similarities with subsequent Fascism. Or might Oda mean "Stendhalian"?

[31] The 1925 novel *Les Faux-monnayeurs* by French novelist André Gide (1869-1951), which features *mise en abyme* – a framing story or novel-within-a-novel – and has as its main theme the original and the copy.

[32] In a kabuki theater, a runway extending from the stage, through the audience, and to the back of the theater, used mainly for entrances and exits by famous actors.

[33] *Yayakoshii* (an Osaka dialect word) in the original Japanese.

who begins the study of depicting the human body by sketching nudes, Sartre depicted the naked body without veiling it with morals, humanism, or concepts. And he believed that as long as human beings are a grotesque existence, all veils are deception and hypocrisy. A few writers in Japan, too, depict the human body. But the body that is depicted is clothed in the veil of emotion, or in veil of concepts, or the body is depicted only as a pretext for decadent thinking like that of a literary youth. In these circumstances, Sartre's "Intimacy" may, after all, be a challenge for Japanese writers to meet. When a new literature is about to rise, a challenge to the established concept of the "human" always arises; the armor of stubborn medieval concepts is smashed and an attempt is made to depict the naked human body, starting with sketching of the physical body. But is the current literature depicting the human body a literature of resistance? Does it possess a scalpel sharp enough to cut through the veil of hypocrisy with which human beings were covered by feudal ideology and its powerful ally, Taoist moralist prejudice, as the amorous works of Saikaku were a paean to humanity originating in the new class of merchants that arose in resistance to the medieval ideology of warriors, monks, and aristocrats? Is it capable of being a new erotic literature, similar to the New Perceptionists, like the early *tanka* of Yosano Akiko and Saitō Mokichi? Or is it capable of being a literature of the sorrow of the body, incorporating the masochism and self-ridicule of the decadents? A literature of Neo-Decadence,[34] which can only find salvation through sinking to the depths of the corruption of the body? Sartre liberates, but he does not look for salvation.

In any case, while efforts to depict human beings have been made since the days of Naturalism, Japanese literature has ended up retreating into mental-attitude novels like works of the figurative arts; it is fair to say that in Japanese literature, "human beings" have never existed. Provided that this is true, the Modern Novel, which pursues human possibility, should start by sketching the human body, naked of the veil of concepts, and develop from there. For instance, Yokmitsu Riichi, to escape the influence of Shiga Naoya's literature, propounded a theory of the pure novel, embraced fiction and coincidence in resistance to the quotidian quality of the traditional novel in Japan, and strove to attain the intellectual quality of the Modern Novel in a new, full-length novel that asserted that the novel is not art, but when he reached the second half of *Longing for Home*,[35] his characters' thoughts began to seek for a spiritual foundation in the world of art objects, thereby straying from the physical body, and at that point Yokomitsu's ambition suddenly lost its potential to develop the Modern Novel. Is this not because this ambitious writer began with Shiga Naoya, and did not investigate the body *before* Shiga Naoya? That is why New Perceptionism ended up bowing down before Shiga Naoya's "model-penmanship" style, and why the description of the tea party in Yokomitsu's *Family Crest*[36] became so verbose.

In hindsight, not only Yokomitsu Riichi but most ambitious writers and new literary movements in Japan have, in the presence of the art-object-like novel represented by Shiga Naoya, secretly felt a sense of awe, or of nostalgia, or been forced to blame themselves for their own decadence, and thereby handily failed in their attempts to realize the Modern Novel. It was not just that their talent was insufficient. They ended up considering that efforts to realize the Modern Novel, which makes the romance painted by the lively dynamics of fiction the playing field for human possibility, were fruitless efforts when compared to skill at observing rabbits[37] or insects. This shows the narrowness of the Japanese view of art, and the denial of the Modern. When Kobayashi Hideo wrote his theory of Shiga Naoya, the potential of his own Modern sensibilities became nostalgic for Shiga Naoya's point of view. This was all right as far as it went, but for the literary establishment to ignore the nostalgia of Kobayashi's potential and unproblematically take his theory for unalloyed praise of Shiga's literature was jumping to conclusions. Kobayashi must share the blame for this. The fact that Kobayashi's Modernity longed for Shiga Naoya's potential primitivity has to do with Kobayashi himself, and to treat it as something pertaining to the literary establishment as a whole – given the fact that Japanese literature has never had enough Modernity to need to yearn for primitivity – is ludicrous. And even if we follow Kobayashi's lead and recognize Shiga Naoya's primitivity, it is not the outer limits of possibility, but rather something pre-modern, something previous to the point where we should start. This is our fate as Japanese at the present time, unable to feel nostalgia because we never had a modern age.

Is the "literature of possibility," after all, possible? But as long as we do not make it possible for Japanese literature, we will never be able to join the modern age. To create a novel is, after all, to create a second Nature, a possible world, and here, human beings should not be depicted as the accumulation of past

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[34] Oda himself was in fact included, along with Dazai Osamu and Sakaguchi Angō, among the "Decadent" or "Hooligan" (Burai-ha) group of writers after World War II.

[35] *Ryoshū*, serialized 1937-1946, but left unfinished at the time of Yokomitsu's death.

[36] *Monshō*, 1934.

[37] This seems to refer to Shiga's 1946 story "Rabbits," which Oda mentions in his essay "The Possibilities of Osaka."

experience, but pursued as the possibility of leaping *beyond* past experience. The novel is the arena for this pursuit, but as long as the form of the novel is a "standard move" that always seeks to limit human possibility, the Modern Novel, whose purpose is to depict the possibilities of human beings as free agents, must always take the form of an antithesis to the traditional form. But the conservatism of the Japanese literary establishment, in which the pre-modern traditional novel continues to have authority even after the War, is an unpardonable reaction against the literary demands of today, which are to bring modernity to Japanese literature. The fact that a few writers rebel against this conservatism by attempting to depict the human body is, therefore, a not undesirable attempt. But the depiction of the human body must be, not the final goal, but simply a sketch; it is only after this sketch is completed that the colors of human possibility can begin to be applied. And these colors should not aim for a pictorial fixing, but should rather go floating away in a musical expansiveness. Human beings are in the midst of anxiety, confusion, and complexity, but the frames of humanism and existing morals seek to forcibly simplify them. Thus, these frames actually blaspheme against humanity. The romance of the fictional and the coincidental seeks to smash these frames of the everyday, but is pronounced "vulgar" by the pious I-Novel view of art. Isn't it this view of art that needs to be exiled, along with old idols, to a dusty corner of the literary establishment? Only then, when writers are given a clean slate, will it become possible, for the first time, to create from the strength of nothingness a "literature of possibility," and the fascination proper to the novel will be born with the breath of the Modern in the literary establishment of Japan.

(December, 1946)